DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 017 SQ 032 383

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TITLE	Designing Your Intercultural Communication Course.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	16p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Body Language; Communication Skills; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Background; *Cultural Education; Cultural Images; Culture Contact; Facial Expressions; Foreign Countries; *Intercultural Communication; *Nonverbal Communication; *Stereotypes; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Middle East

ABSTRACT

This paper presents suggestions for a 60-hour course in intercultural communication that develops cognition skills needed to understand life in foreign countries. The initial part of the course is intended to heighten the participant's awareness of his or her own "home-culture"; the latter part concentrates on assumptions, values, and behaviors of the "target-culture." Although the course described herein is designed for culturally homogeneous classes in the Middle East, it can serve as a model for multicultural groups anywhere. The paper is divided into the following sections: "Considering Parameters"; "Part One: Topics and Sequencing"; "Defining Culture"; "Human Needs"; "Cultural Expectations and Behaviors"; "Identity Symbols"; "Rituals"; "Methodology: The Students Teach the Teacher"; "Part Two: Understanding Target-Culture Behavior"; "Nonverbal Communication"; "Basic Reality-Assumptions"; "Home-Culture Values--Proverbs"; "Cultural Heroes"; "Cognition as Culturally Determined"; "Stereotyping--Roadblocks to Understanding"; "Culture Shock and Adjustment"; "Critical Incidents"; and "Pedagogical Approach." (BB)

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ED 450 017

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Designing Your Intercultural Communication Course

by Hans Straub, MA, ABD

To crash another culture with only the vaguest notion of its underlying dynamics reflects not only a provincial naiveté but a dangerous form of cultural arrogance.-- Dean C. Barlund

In response to views such as Dean Barlund's, publishers are including cultural information in their ESL texts, while teachers are coming to recognize the importance of "underlying dynamics" of culture in L2 communication. Such steps are laudable, but they may fall short of the mark when it comes to actually equipping sojourners with the cognitive skills needed in a second-culture environment.

On the commercial market today, there doesn't seem to be a universally-applicable intercultural communication (IC) program or text suitable for culturally-divergent student populations. From country to country, social taboos, politics, and religious traditions and values differ. These cultural variables need to be respected if students are to remain open to new experiences. To compensate for the dearth of IC materials, instructors often need to develop their own IC courses that meet local standards of acceptability. Once instructors understand the basic concepts of cultural comparison, they can develop appropriate learning materials.

This paper presents suggestions for a 60-hour course in intercultural communication that develops cognition skills needed to understand life in

foreign countries. The initial part of the course is intended to heighten the participant's awareness of his or her own "home-culture"; the latter part concentrates on assumptions, values, and behaviors of the "target-culture"--in our case, the white, middle-class, American way-of-life. Although the course described herein is designed for culturally homogeneous classes in the Middle East, it can serve as a model for multicultural groups anywhere.

Considering Parameters:

To begin, it is necessary to recognize parameters within which we must operate. We need to consider our particular situations, to decide on cultural elements that may be too sensitive to be discussed in class: delicate matters such as male-female relationships; political hot potatoes like revolutions or democracy; volatile subjects like alcohol, sexual orientation, drugs and music, all part of modern American life. Topics that we often take for granted in our own societies can blow up in our faces when raised abroad. Consequently, we need to identify *sensitive topics* and keep them in mind while designing our course.

Part One: Topics and Sequencing

Because it isn't always clear exactly what ought to be covered in an IC course, let me suggest topics and sequencing that has worked well for me. Part One (20 hours) of the course begins with modules of instruction that allow students to explore their own *home-cultures* before venturing into unknown territories (see Grove). This is essential. The first third of our course is devoted to raising the participants' awareness that they are *members* of a particular "home-culture". By exploring their own national

culture, students acquire the vocabulary with which to describe values, expectations, behaviors, traditions, customs, rituals, forms of greeting, cultural signs and identity-symbols familiar to themselves. Once students know how to talk about their home-culture, they are ready to discuss the values, expectations and traditions of others with a higher degree of intellectual objectivity.

Defining Culture:

What are some of the modules that we include in the home-culture section of our course? We begin with a characterization of what culture is. We allow students to brainstorm freely, but lead them to the notions that (a) culture is the *total way-of-life of a group or society*; (b) all humans living in groups have cultures; (c) there are no "inferior" or "superior" cultures; (d) cultures are formed to meet human needs. Straight forward enough.

Human Needs:

Once we have a definition of culture, we explore human needs in general. Abraham Malsow has suggested "higher" and "lower" order needs that all cultures try to meet. Physical needs, such as food, water and shelter, are basic, while formal education, self-development, self-fulfillment, etc. are at the top of Maslow's hierarchy. If we don't have access to Maslow's concepts, we can formulate our own hierarchy of needs. We ask: *What needs do people have to take care of before they are comfortable?* The answers will become obvious. Once we have identified universal human needs, we can discuss what needs are *particular* to members of the

students' own culture. These might include security needs, religious requirements or political imperatives unique to our students. The point of the exercise is to instill in students the sense that they are members of a culture and that their way-of-life has evolved to meet particular needs.

Cultural Expectations and Behaviors:

Having arrived at a characterization of culture and having explored human needs, we relate needs and culture to *behaviors*. In one or two units, students become aware that behaviors are *culturally-prescribed norms* intended to meet *expectations* or needs shared by members of a culture. They learn, for instance, that certain social occasions demand specific behaviors and speech-acts. For this module, I use an exercise called "What's Rude?" in which participants identify *rude* and *polite* behaviors appropriate in their home-culture. We discuss what to say and do when calling on strangers, friends, elders, and social superiors. (Since, at this stage of the program we don't go deeply into cross-cultural comparisons, we make only passing mention of how members of other cultures respond in similar situations.) Here, the goal is for students to become aware that norms of behavior are culturally-defined and varied. They need to learn the cultural codes of their society before they discover the codes of conduct of the target culture.

After behaviors, we proceed to friendship as a culturally-defined concept. This is an inquiry into *how, when, where* and *with whom* people typically become friends in the home-culture. Questions to explore: *Does tribal or family loyalty determine friendship? Is friendship a practical*

matter, an emotional bond, a relationship of mutual obligations? Can men and women be friends? This kind of exploratory exercise can also be done with kin relationships in general: *Who owes what to whom in the kinship system?* Through group brainstorming, students begin to realize that there are patterns of *expectations*, prescribed *behaviors* and *obligations* attached to social relationships. In other words: There is *purpose* to interpersonal relationships; there is *predictability*.

Identity Symbols:

For the sake of variety and to broaden our explorations, our course includes signs and symbols (*identity symbols*) of the home-culture. These are explored in a show-and-tell format during which students explain "meaningful" objects, things particular to their culture (a rice bowl, chop sticks, the national flag, an animal used as a national symbol, etc.) Participants explain what an object represents or means, the rules (if any) for its use, while the audience prepares questions to ask the presenter or takes notes.

Rituals:

From cultural signs and symbols, we proceed to examine home-culture rituals and the social *values* that such rituals manifest. Here, we explore the procedures, symbols, and prescribed behaviors of common events like weddings, funerals, rites-of-passage, festivals, and so on. These are related to human needs, culturally-defined values and expectations. The goal of this unit, again, is to relate behaviors to the things people value, expect, and commonly take for granted.

Methodology: *The Students Teach the Teacher*

At this point we should note that the methodology employed in the initial part of the course is student-centered: *the students hypothesize, brainstorm, discuss, conclude, and inform the instructor of their findings. The students teach the teacher.* This approach makes sense especially when the instructor is not a member of the local culture, or when the instructor finds him- or herself in a multicultural classroom. The benefits of this approach include a high degree of student motivation, lots of oral language practice, and discoveries that are memorable for being student-generated. Students work in groups of threes or fours on everything except, perhaps, show-and-tell presentations. Participants are graded on group/class participation, on the quality of presentations, and on a terminal quiz of concepts used in the course.

Part Two: Understanding Target-Culture Behavior

Hitherto, we have included in the course topics that focus on the home-culture. Our intention has been to raise the students' awareness of their own way-of-life, to acquaint them with some basic cultural concepts, give them vocabulary with which to talk about culture, and to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity necessary to proceed to cross-cultural analyses. Our next objective is more daunting: *to create in participants an awareness of the building blocks of our particular worldviews in relation to other worldviews*. Our purpose is to create a certain degree of understanding of target-cultures from an *insider's* perspective, an empathetic view that permits the student to accurately interpret foreign-

culture behavior. We cover nonverbal communication, cultural assumptions, values, expectations, stereotypes and cultural adjustment or culture shock. (see Paige).

In a 40-hour segment, we explore how these elements of our *worldview* can present roadblocks to inter-cultural understanding, and how they can sabotage the formation of an otherwise intelligent perspective on a target-culture. We use discussion and analysis of *critical incidents* to see how our worldviews occasionally collide, leaving people perplexed and offended (see Storti).

Nonverbal Communication:

In our module on nonverbal communication we have chosen various components of the topic: dress, colors, "body language" (facial expressions, posture, gestures and proxemics). By understanding how cultures (and *subcultures*, or *co-cultures*) communicate through these *signs*, we can "read" a person's social status, group membership, and approachability. Pictures and videos of people interacting normally serve as our tools. Students are asked to speculate on the significance of various styles of clothing, the symbolic meanings of colors, gestures, facial expressions, and the physical distance people unconsciously put between each other. We ask: *How are these similar or different to the home-culture? How could these be misunderstood?* The goal is to teach participants that nonverbal communication patterns vary from one culture to the next.

Basic Reality-Assumptions:

Also in the second part of the course comes the most challenging concept—*Basic Reality-Assumptions*. In this module, course participants try to define what *notions* lie *behind* our cultural values, perspectives, attitudes and, consequently, our expectations and behaviors. We explore what we, in the home-culture, assume to be "true" about the world and the way things work, and compare/contrast these with American (and other foreign-culture) assumptions about reality. These *basic premises* about time, progress, the purpose of life, human nature, God, the invisible world, and many other things, may be similar or remarkably different from culture to culture. The aim of our discussions is to recognize some basic perspectives that underlie our interpretations of the world, and to acknowledge that such assumptions can differ. What should emerge from our discussions is that, contrary to what we have been taught, "truths" (assumptions) are not necessarily universal. What's "real" or "true" to one group may not be real or true for us.

Recognizing that there are essential differences in *worldviews* permits students to respond more effectively when cross-cultural communication breaks down, as it most certainly will (see Stewart and Bennett). Having said that, please note that our experience suggests only the most sophisticated students are able to intelligently handle discussions of worldviews. You may omit this step and jump to the next one.

Home-Culture Values—Proverbs:

From cultural assumptions it is a logical step to things, qualities or abstract ideas that a culture considers valuable. We explore home-culture *values* and compare/contrast them with mainstream "American" values. We do this by examining popular proverbs and sayings. "All that glitters is not gold"; "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours"; "No pain, no gain" are examples of cultural values embedded in sayings. These examples, respectively, teach the value of skepticism, mutual cooperation, hard work or sacrifice for the sake of gain. Many cultures have similar gems of wisdom used to transmit attitudes and values from generation to generation. You'll find students are eager to compare such readily-remembered maxims. The point, however, is to note the *cultural values* that are associated with sayings and proverbs.

Cultural Heroes:

Continuing with our goal of raising student awareness of cultural values, we look at the qualities which we admire in cultural heroes. These, like other determiners, are culturally-defined even though they may be universally shared. Values such as perseverance, innovativeness, individualism, cooperation, self-motivation, loyalty, friendship, public service, or piety, may be discovered through biographies of famous men and women who have contributed to society. We trace biographies of American heroes (from all ethnic backgrounds) who have embodied values shared by Americans. What emerges from this exercise is an awareness of the values of the target-culture and the degree to which we share such values.

Cognition as Culturally Determined:

In preparation for a discussion of *stereotyping* (a major impediment to an objective perspective on others), we include in the course a module on human cognition (see Summerfield). The mind tends to jump to conclusions (and acts on them) from a *minimal* amount of sensory input. Before all the data is in, we already attribute meaning to our impressions, and find ourselves acting on these, often to learn that we have been mistaken. By way of demonstration, communication instructors frequently resort to cognition experiments that show that *we see what we expect to see* out of habit rather than what is *actually* there. The classic example is the well-known old woman/young girl picture (see Smith and Otero). Photographs of street scenes, too, elicit various interpretations which reflect what individuals think *ought to be* going on. Such demonstrations are intended to illustrate that our perceptions can be erroneous, that *we are culturally-conditioned to expect things to be a certain way.* This lesson is in preparation for a module on stereotyping.

Stereotyping--Roadblocks to Understanding:

What applies to sense impressions applies to the human propensity to stereotype others. *Stereotypes* are gross simplifications that neatly *sum up* members of other groups or cultures. Such impressions prevent a more profound understanding of who others are as individuals and as members of social groups. Stereotypes are probably the most difficult stumbling block to overcome for any sojourner on foreign turf and, as such, require considerable attention in IC courses.

First, students need to learn what stereotypes are and how they interfere with communication. Students are asked to brainstorm common impressions they have of various nationals and then are asked where such impressions come from. The next step is to ask whether students have any first-hand knowledge of the same foreign nationals and whether foreigners really have lived up to these impressions. It should become apparent that while there may be a kernel of truth to stereotypes, they don't adequately represent individuals. Students learn that *stereotyping prevents our dealing effectively with members of other cultures*. Teachers should consider including films and other visual media of members of the target culture for discussion. By becoming aware of home-culture preconceptions about the target-culture, student will better be able to overcome stereotypes and see individuals for themselves.

Culture Shock and Adjustment:

We include a module on culture-shock and adjustment that effects every sojourner to some extent. Students seldom know what to expect when they settle into another culture. Their moods vary from happiness to despair at being away from the familiar. In order to prepare them for these emotional ups and downs, and to learn some coping skills, our course includes a 48-minute video, "Cold Water", by Noriko Ogami, shown in manageable segments. We ask student groups to identify how the characters interviewed in the video felt during initial stages of adjustment and what they found confusing or different. We also ask which of the interviewees' impressions of Americans were stereotypical, then we

examine common patterns of cultural adjustment—the emotional patterns of highs and lows that students will have to deal with while abroad (see Weaver).

Critical Incidents:

Finally, in the latter part of the course, students learn to analyze incidents that involve cross-cultural misunderstandings--conflicts of values and expectations. Instructors can compose scripts of common interpersonal occurrences in which characters from different cultures have divergent interpretations of what is said or done. Students are asked what the communication problem in the incident is, what values are involved, and how the misunderstanding could be corrected or avoided. The objective is to teach participants to analyze misunderstandings in cultural terms and to learn how to deal effectively with similar situations.

Pedagogical Approach:

The pedagogical approach to the second part, as to the first, is the free exchange of interpretations and ideas. While the instructor may be the "authority" on the target-culture, he or she cannot possibly anticipate all of the difficulties students have in comprehending another way-of-life. Hence, the importance of student-centered talk, student-centered activities. And, as in the first part of the course, students need constant reminder that the cultural concepts they are learning have practical relevance to their ultimate goal: cultural adjustment and a successful sojourn abroad.

You may vary the types of exercises you employ and substitute cultural topics for discussion. However, it is advisable to keep any contrasting of cultural values to the latter parts of the program when students are better able to discuss ways of life with a greater degree of objectivity. The course described has been tried numerous times and has proven popular and effective.

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